

Curry Slaymaker - Father of Huascarán National Park

By Lew Scholl

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[lewscholl@msn.com](mailto:lewscholl@msn.com)

*This year (2011) is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Peace Corps. Its accomplishments are being recognized in many places around the world that have hosted Peace Corps volunteers. As one who has traveled and climbed in Peru, I have a particular interest in one Peace Corps volunteer who accomplished something that those of us who love the mountains consider truly noteworthy; the creation of a major national park in one of the world's most spectacular mountain ranges, Peru's Cordillera Blanca – (the White Range)". Curry Slaymaker, who grew up in Rainier Oregon, laid the groundwork for Huascarán National Park while in the Peace Corps. In 1972, six years after leaving the Peace Corps, driven by his deep love of this magnificent place, he came back again to complete this work as a direct employee of the Peruvian government. In 1973, while traveling in Peru, I had the opportunity to meet him. In 1976 he died in a mountaineering accident only a year after the park had become a reality, largely under his guidance and inspiration. This history and Curry's accomplishments are little known outside of Peru. In 2007 I joined in a Mazama outing and trek around Peru's Huayhuash Range – a trip that took us to Huaraz, the mountaineering "Mecca" of the Cordillera Blanca and Peru. This trip inspired me to investigate Curry's life and the circumstances of his death. What follows is the result of that research.*

Curry Slaymaker's life started out mundane and tame in small town America. How it ended is a different matter. Sometime after his birth on September 5, 1943 in Glendale California, Curry and his family moved to Oregon. His parents, Maurice and Marie Slaymaker, were hard-working folks and solid citizens. Their life and livelihood reflected the farm-town origins of Maurice, who originally hailed from the farm country around Whiteside Illinois. Curry and his younger brother, Neil, were both good students; good at sports and well liked, but in school were not among the most popular students. Maurice worked for Purina Corporation selling animal feed and agricultural seed to small farmers. After the family moved to Oregon, they lived in various towns until they finally settled for many years in Rainier, a small town on the Columbia River near Longview, Washington. Maurice managed the Purina feed and seed store there. Curry worked in the store at times and helped his mother, Marie, with her business of growing potted plants to sell at the store<sup>1</sup>. The family was well known and respected in this small rural community. A lot like his father, Curry was easy to get to know superficially, but tended to be quiet and reserved. Neil says that Curry kept to himself a lot. So they never had a close relationship. They did all the things that small town teens did in those days – playing sports and all - plus Curry did perhaps a bit more.

At some point – perhaps after finishing high school in 1961, according to Neil<sup>2</sup>, Curry climbed Mount Saint Helens. This was in the days before the big eruption when it was still elegantly symmetrical and one of the highest glaciated peaks in Washington. This was about the time that I first climbed it, myself. My first time on a glacier, I found it an enchanting experience; starting out in the pre-dawn darkness watching the moon and the sun rise over the mountainside; then seeing the world from the top in a whole new perspective –

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Darlene Witham Pearce, Rainier Oregon 5/3/09

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Neil Slaymaker at the Oregon Veterans Home, The Dalles Oregon 5/2/09.

all mountains, trees, clouds and snow. That memory drew me back to the mountains and mountaineering and it still does. I expect that Curry had a similar feeling about his experience on Saint Helens that he never forgot.

Not much is known about Curry's first college education experience – except that he was interested in botany and that he studied at the local college, Lower Columbia Community College, for two years. Then he decided to join the Peace Corps. He joined under the belief that it was the best way to serve his country; and he was told that Peace Corps service would replace his military obligation to serve during the Vietnam War. The Peace Corps experience took him to Peru. Perhaps it was his own enchanting experience on St. Helens, similar to mine, that drew him there. He must have indicated an interest in forestry, as he was assigned to work under Marc Dourojeanni<sup>3</sup>, then a forestry research professor at La Molina University near Lima. He did not remain long in the academic environment nor in the urban area. Instead, he went to work in the high Andes, staying in Huaraz, a small city at the base of Peru's Cordillera Blanca.

The aptly named “white range”, presents a seemingly endless array of glaciated peaks that give Huaraz an other-worldly aura. These mountains, their unusual flora and fauna, the varieties of cultures, and the colorful dress and culture of the native peoples are a magnet for adventurous souls from the north seeking new experiences. I was one of these, myself, when I met Curry there in 1973.

Curry was especially drawn to the unusual living things of the mountains – particularly the plant life. It is rumored that he discovered a new species while studying the unusual flora of the Andes. He saw more clearly than most others the need to protect it all from human exploitation and encroachment. During his time in the Peace Corps he wrote a report about the Cordillera Blanca that laid the groundwork for a future national park. At the end of his Peace Corps service on returning to the US, he was surprised to receive a draft notice and was inducted into the Army to serve in Vietnam. He went willingly – his only concern was the time he would lose in completing the education he so strongly desired. While in Vietnam in April of 1970, he received word that his brother, Neil, had been seriously injured in an automobile accident and took leave from the Army to come home. Comforted during this difficult time by, Sandra Geipel - a family friend, he had known in high school, he promised to marry her<sup>4</sup>. He managed an early discharge from the Army for the purpose of returning to his college studies. Enrolling in Southern Oregon State College in Ashland he intended to become more employable before marrying. It is not clear why he lost interest in marrying Sandra, but it is known that about that same time he met a young woman who was willing to travel to Peru with him. As later events suggest, perhaps his true love was not destined to be a woman, but rather the Peruvian Andes in whose arms he died.

In 1972 Curry and the young woman he met in college, Kathy Elkinton, my stepfather's niece, went back to the Cordillera Blanca. They spent the months of Kathy's summer vacation hiking, and camping to explore and photograph this special and unique part of the world; its flora, fauna, and mountain scenery. At the end

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<sup>3</sup> [See email from Marc Dourojeanni 2/9/09](#). Dourojeanni obviously had a great influence on Curry and also played an important role in creating Huascarán National Park. Dourojeanni now lives in Brazil and is considered to be the world's leading expert on the Amazon. He has worked extensively for decades to preserve natural ecosystems, and has written several books on the topics of natural parks and protecting the natural environment.

<sup>4</sup> Conversation with Sandra Geipel 5/20/09

of her summer break from the university, Kathy returned to the states to complete her Master's degree. She had hopes of returning as a Peace Corps volunteer the following summer. Curry was committed to staying in Peru to continue the work he had begun a few years earlier while in the Peace Corps – the work of creating a national park. With a renewed belief in the cause of protecting the Cordillera Blanca and its natural beauty, he spent the next several months giving slide shows and talks in Peru to promote the national park.

With the assistance of Marc Dourojeanni, Curry spent several months working to obtain funds from the Peruvian government to begin the park project. In March of 1973 the funds were secured and he was named director of the project to develop Huascarán National Park. It was in August of that year when, on my own travel adventure, I arrived in Huaraz. I had word that Kathy would be there with the Peace Corps, but on arrival I found Curry but not Kathy. As a choice of personal commitments, she was not able to come. The park project was in full swing and he was planning a trek to begin establishing the park boundaries. This was to be a significant expedition for several weeks to remote areas of the cordillera supported by burros and a crew of local *arrieros*. He invited me stay an extra few weeks so I could join him on this trek, but I declined, as I had my own educational plans. I had a couple of weeks to spend in Huaraz; so he welcomed me to sleep in a corner of his apartment while I explored the area. After I left, Curry went out on this surveying expedition as well as several others during the following 2 years. In July of 1975 the Huascarán National Park was officially established. Curry was named as the first park “jefe”. He had personally done most of the surveying to establish the boundaries as well as most of the botanical research, promotion, and administrative work.

He was committed to the Park and its administration but had recently started a new activity. Inspired by his constant awareness of the towering snowy peaks around him and likely also his memory of climbing Mount Saint Helens years before, he began serious “andinismo” as they call mountaineering in the Andes. Most frequently he climbed with his friend and cohort in the park project, Michael Rourke. They completed several challenging climbs, the most important of which was the first ascent of Ranrapalca's North Face as documented in the American Alpine Journal (Rourke, 1976). Perhaps it was while climbing together that they hatched a vision of their next important role in the community of Huaraz. Michael had been a physical education teacher at the Los Pinos Catholic school near town, for several years and he wanted to do something more to develop the potential of the young people of Huaraz. Michael saw the coming growth of the fledgling industries of mountaineering and trekking as an opportunity for the youth there to serve as guides and porters. So, Michael and Curry, whose combination of talents suited them perfectly for the task, set about to educate these young men in the ways of mountaineering and how to conduct business with foreigners. At a time when Americans were not held in high regard in Peru, these two men gained the confidence and esteem of the locals. Michael became the president of the local mountaineering club, “Club Andinista Cordillera Blanca”. This work along with their roles in the national park made these two men among those most highly regarded in Huaraz.

My own experience of Curry in Huaraz was 2 to 3 years earlier. I had arrived in Huaraz after nearly 3 months of hard travel – mostly hitchhiking - tired, recovering from being sick, and with very little money for the trip home. I needed a place to stay until my mountaineering friends came, as I still held some hope of joining them to attempt summiting Nevado Husacarán, Peru's highest peak. To help me in this condition, Curry gave me a corner of his small apartment to sleep in each night while I recovered, explored the area, and

waited for my friends. They never showed up, and I stayed there for over 2 weeks. This gave me some time to talk with Curry about the mountains. He shared his topographic maps with me, invited me to join him on his surveying trek, and gave me advice on where to go on my solo adventures. In retrospect, considering his later pursuit of the snowy summits, it seems strange that he said nothing about his own desire to seek the summits of high peaks.

When I returned to the States I didn't maintain a correspondence with Curry for long, so I knew nothing of his growing passion for serious mountaineering. So I had no reason to think of him as a mountain climber. Sure, he was a competent outdoorsman and biologist, and I knew he was doing important exploration work to form the national park, but it never occurred to me that he was a serious "andinista". Three or four years later when I first heard that he had gone off into the mountains and disappeared, I had no details about the accident. So I made up my own version. I saw him out trekking somewhere below the snow line during one of the biological expeditions for his work with the park. I imagined that he was exploring the park's flora and fauna or doing his boundary surveys when something mysterious happened to cause his death. "Perhaps", I thought, "He was killed, while on one of these treks, by suspicious indigenous people who lived in fear of the dreaded "pistakos", legendary white people who killed natives to use their fat." Curry knew these stories and in remote areas had encountered people who feared him for his white skin. I had no knowledge of what happened, so my imagination was free to play. I only knew that he went into the mountains and never returned. The significance of the fateful moment when I last knew Curry in August of 1973 did not occur to me as relevant to his disappearance. As I prepared to leave Huaraz that year, he bought my ice axe and crampons. He knew I was low on cash; so I thought of his motivation mostly as a way to help me pay my way home. As I found out years later, that purchase marked the beginning of his serious mountaineering life.

Three years later in July of 1976, with Huascarán National Park now established, Curry was the overall park "jefe" (chief or director). Michael was the park's mountaineering director and was now married to Nora, a Peruvian woman, and their daughter, Kathy, wasn't much more than a newborn. A climbing party from Catalonia in Spain had just arrived in town. This party consisted of Joan Massons, Guillem Arias, and leader, Ramon Bramona. Mr. Bramona had been in communication for several months with Michael, who had offered to help them get started on their expedition to the Parón valley north of Huaraz. Michael bought the food for this group and set them up with two of the best porters, Fortunato and Honorato. When the Catalonians arrived in Peru, Michael and his wife, Nora, gave them a warm welcome and invited them to an international party to dedicate the new headquarters for the "Club Andinista Cordillera Blanca". At this event the Catalonian group became acquainted with both Curry and Michael and learned about their work teaching mountaineering skills to the local youth.

Curry and Michael were apparently inspired by this friendship and became interested in visiting the Parón Valley themselves for the first time. So they decided to go to the same area to explore and climb, as they would now have the comfort of a friendly party nearby. To further inspire their interest in climbing, they had joined with two other climbers from the US, Mike Lazzari, and Ryan Goodman. The Catalonians came first to the Parón Valley and established a base camp at the head of the lake. The next day, July 9, Michael and Curry and their two companions came up Parón Lake by rowboat and stopped at the Catalonian base camp. On visiting with the Catalonians and the two local porters, the four Americans decided to stay at the base camp with the Catalonians and their porters for the night of July 9.

The next day, July 10, the four Americans went northeastward to make a camp on the Artisonraju Glacier; their goal – the summit of Nevado Parón (5,600 meters or 18,370 feet ; also called Paría). At the same time, the Catalonians went south ascending toward the pass between Pisco and Huandoy Este; their goal – the summit of Nevado Pisco Oeste (5,752 meters or 18,870 feet). For the following two days, snow and bad weather forced both parties to delay their climbing. They stayed holed up in their tents during July 11 and 12. On the morning of July 13, the weather cleared. The Americans attempted to summit Parón that day. Michael and Curry first climbed Nevado Chico de Parón and were ascending the ridge nearing the summit of Nevado Grande de Parón. At 2:00 PM they were roped together in advance of the other two pushing through 2 feet of new snow when Lazzari and Goodman saw Curry fall and slide through an overhanging snow cornice pulling Michael on the rope behind him down the precipitous east side of the ridge; the side of the Huaripampa valley (Espinoza, 1976). Lazzari and Goodman peered through the hole in the cornice trying to determine where their companions landed but were unable to see any sign of them. With no means of attempting a rescue themselves, they headed back toward Huaraz for help.

That same day, July 13, the Catalonians continued their ascent. Oblivious to what had happened on the other side of the valley, they camped that night on top of the ridge. The next day, July 14, they achieved the summit of Pisco Oeste and began their decent. Breaking their camp on the ridge, they continued descending to the previous camp below the ridge where they found a note, apparently left by Lazzari and Goodman, requesting equipment and help in the rescue.

Also on July 14, Lazzari and Goodman arrived in Huaraz and a rescue attempt was launched. Returning to the Parón Valley the next day, they ascended toward the location where Michael and Curry had fallen. The plan was to descend the 300 meters by rope to the fallen climbers who were not likely to be alive at that time. Difficult conditions and word of another accident limited their ability to continue. Other teams of climbers as well as a rescue helicopter explored from the east side of the ridge attempting for 7 days to locate the fallen climbers – but without success. Only a track in the snow, apparently of their fall, could be seen from a helicopter. The track ended in a deep crevasse at the head of a very broken part of the glacier, which seemed impossible access from below. A week after the accident, all hope was abandoned of finding them alive or of even finding the bodies, and the rescue was called off.<sup>5</sup>

The Catalonians were deeply affected by the loss of their newly found friends. Both Mr. Bramona and Mr. Massons wrote accounts in their native Catalan language of their brief acquaintance with Michael and Curry, memorializing them and recognizing the great contributions they made to mountaineering in the Andes. Many people in Huaraz and other Peruvians who had worked with them, mourned their loss. Curry's parents traveled to Huaraz to learn what they could about their son's death and to recover his belongings.

I knew Curry only – not Michael - and my acquaintance, 3 years earlier, was brief. But, as with the Catalonians, knowing Curry enriched my life and gave me experiences I will never forget. When I think of their bodies entombed in the ice, I wonder about their future emergence. When will this happen? Or are their remains stuck in the snow at the head of the glacier, frozen and perfectly preserved? I wonder if the old ice axe and crampons I sold to Curry so many years ago may lie there entombed with Curry and Michael. Will they be carried slowly downward - some day to emerge as a time capsule mystifying some

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<sup>5</sup> This paragraph is from a combination of sources: Bramona, 1976; Massons, 1976; and Espinoza Rodriguez, 1976

future explorer? Or is it possible the emergence could occur in my lifetime? Whatever happens with any physical remains, it is my desire to recover forgotten parts of this story and keep it alive. These two men made a huge difference to the preservation of this amazing part of the earth and contributed greatly to the people of Huaraz. They still live there as something like mythological figures, but more real than mythological figures in the history and lore of the Peruvian Andes.

It is largely to Curry Slaymaker, Marc Doroujeanni, and the Peace Corps that we owe the existence of Huascarán National Park. Michael Rourke also played an important role in the park's mountaineering history and in supporting the local youth in learning to be climbers and porters. This legacy remains today, not only in the park that protects these great jewels of the Andes, but also in the Peruvian mountaineering and trekking guides who annually serve a swarm of international adventure-seeking guests.

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